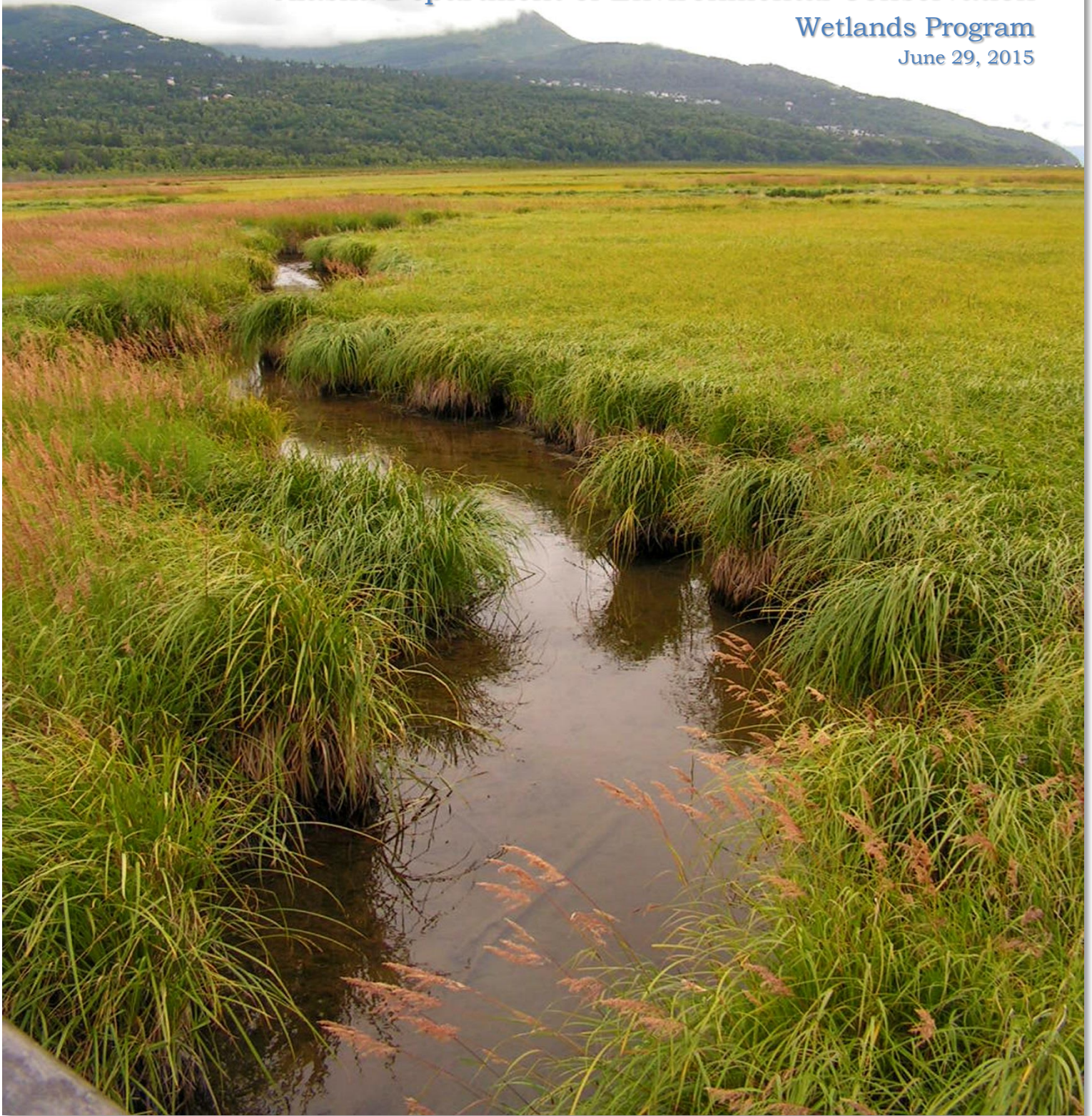


Alaska Wetland Program Plan

Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation

Wetlands Program

June 29, 2015



*A Vision for Building a Comprehensive Wetland Strategy for the State of Alaska
Planning Years 2016-2018*



Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation policy:

To conserve, improve, and protect its natural resources and environment and control water, land, and air pollution, in order to enhance the health, safety, and welfare of the people of the state and their overall economic and social well-being.

Mission of DEC Division of Water:

To improve and protect water quality.



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Alaska Wetland Program Plan Vision Statement

The purpose of the Alaska Wetland Program Plan is to establish a strategic statewide plan for assessing the state's wetlands, compile science-based information to identify wetland functions and values, and develop a framework for identifying, evaluating, and implementing efficiencies in wetland regulatory programs within the state. The Alaska Wetland Program Plan will be used to establish a cooperative and collaborative approach to manage Alaska's wetland resources for their recreational, economic, environmental and human health benefits.

History and Background

Wetland Program Development Grants and Wetland Program Plans

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began the Wetland Program Development Grant (WPDG) program in 1990 to help states, tribes, local governments, and others develop programs and projects to protect and restore wetlands. The WPDG program provides eligible¹ applicants an opportunity to conduct projects that promote the coordination and acceleration of research, investigations, experiments, training, demonstrations, surveys, and studies relating to water pollution. WPDG's can be used to continually build and refine any element of a comprehensive wetland program.

Many states, including Alaska, receive WPDGs to develop a Wetland Program Plan (WPP). WPPs describe overall program goals along with broad-based actions and more specific activities that will help achieve those goals. Timelines for WPP's vary between 3-6 years. WPPs are generally consistent with EPA's Core Element Framework (CEF), which outlines the four "core elements" of a wetland program. The core elements include (1) Monitoring and Assessment, (2) Regulation, (3) Voluntary Restoration and Protection, and (4) Water Quality Standards for Wetlands². Grant recipients can address one or more of the core elements in any order they deem appropriate. For each core element, the CEF provides a menu of program building activities that an organization can pursue to advance development of the core element.

Wetlands in Alaska

Approximately 65% of the nation's wetlands are located in Alaska. Alaska's wetlands cover approximately 174 million acres, or about 43% of the surface area³. Alaska's wetlands include tundra, permafrost areas, marshes, bogs, and similar areas. The state's many intertidal, riparian and shallow water ponds and associated wetlands are recognized as important breeding habitats for numerous migratory bird species. The value of wetlands to wildlife in Alaska is not limited to migratory birds; many mammals and other species utilize the habitat year round. Wetlands located within watersheds also provide rearing habitat to juvenile salmon. Intertidal wetlands serve as a transition zone for anadromous fish moving to and from freshwater to the marine environment.

Wetlands provide many other valuable functions, such as providing insulation for permafrost (temperature regulation) and maintaining water quality by slowly filtering excess nutrients, sediments, and pollutants before water seeps into rivers, streams, and underground aquifers. Wetlands are valued for their many recreational uses from hiking, photography/wildlife watching, hunting/fishing, and paddling (canoe and

¹ All State, tribes, local governments, interstate associations, intertribal consortia, and national non-profit, non-governmental organizations are eligible to apply.

² To learn more about the CEF visit: http://water.epa.gov/grants_funding/wetlands/cefintro.cfm.

³ Hall, et.al 1994 Status of Alaska Wetlands.

kayak). Wetlands can also provide valuable flood regulation/retention in some flood prone areas due to the ability to retain large amounts of water. In Alaska, many of the areas that are economically important to the state are located in areas with high concentrations of wetlands⁴.

Alaska's Wetland Program Plan

The State of Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is developing an Alaska WPP with an expected duration of three years covering the period from 2016 to 2018. The purpose of the WPP is to establish a strategic plan that captures Alaska's wetland management goals and identifies short and long-term activities needed to achieve those goals. This work is supported by a WPDG from the EPA. Alaska's WPDG supports the development of an Alaska WPP that addresses the first two of the four core elements of a comprehensive wetlands program listed above: Monitoring and Assessment, and Regulation.

DEC has led the development of this strategic plan through the coordination of a state working group and by hosting a wetlands program workshop. In addition to staff from DEC, the state workgroup included staff from the Departments of Natural Resources (DNR) Division of Mining, Land & Water and Office of Project Management & Permitting, Fish & Game (ADF&G), Division of Habitat, Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF), and Law (DOL). The workgroup met several times over one year to identify mutual needs and uses, shared goals and objectives, and potential tasks the state could reasonably accomplish in the next several years. DEC prepared a draft WPP that was presented to the workshop participants.

The purpose of the workshop was to provide an opportunity for key stakeholder groups to provide input and comments on the draft plan. Twenty people from the following organizations participated in the workshop: EPA, US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, DEC, DNR, ADF&G, ADOT&PF and the consulting firms HDR, ERM, and AECOM. During the workshop, EPA and DEC presented information on WPDG's and Alaska's development of the draft WPP. Participants discussed a variety of issues including implementation of the joint EPA and USACE 2008 compensatory mitigation rule, data sharing and mapping, how the WPP would integrate with existing programs, regulatory authorities, and long-term funding for the plan. Participants largely supported the WPP and the state's emphasis on a collaborative interagency approach. Some participants encouraged the state to maximize their efforts by simultaneously addressing several unrelated activities on parallel tracks. For example, the state could begin collecting and consolidating wetland data while also developing a mitigation strategy. The group established the top shortterm priorities for the period between 2016-2018, which included wetland mapping, characterizing the state's ecoregions, developing a single or regional functional assessments, and developing a mitigation strategy.

Overview of Specific Goals

Organization and Cooperative Management

The intent behind this planning document is to create a framework for a collaborative and cooperative approach to managing wetlands within the state of Alaska. The sheer size of Alaska, the complex variety of

⁴ To learn more about wetlands, visit EPA's Wetlands webpage at: <http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/> and the US Army Corps of Engineers Technical and Biological Information webpage at: <http://www.usace.army.mil/Missions/CivilWorks/RegulatoryProgramandPermits/techbio.aspx>

wetlands, and the remoteness of many locations in the state make a collaborative approach to wetland management essential. Successful management of Alaska's wetlands will depend on wetland managers sharing data, working together to develop policies and consistent guidance, and openly discussing issues of statewide concern.

We acknowledge that not all activities outlined in this plan can be accomplished between the years 2016 and 2018. This plan is intended to be a strategic plan that outlines the goals, objectives, and activities the state would like to accomplish in the short (3 years) and long-term (10+ years). In the short term, the state plans to focus its efforts during the 2016-2018 grant cycle on Goal 1 and Goal 5. Goal 1 is to establish the environmental baseline data by creating an Alaska Wetland Workgroup to oversee the WPP and creating an Alaska Wetland Inventory of wetland data. The Alaska Wetland Workgroup will assist in prioritizing future activities, as well as obtaining resources to implement them. On a yearly basis, this work group will review progress toward achieving the goals and objectives of this plan and reassess priorities for the coming year. Periodic review will help maintain the momentum for task completion and encourage agencies to be accountable to their commitments. The plan will be updated as actions are accomplished and new ones are established. Goal 5 focuses on addressing a mitigation strategy for the state. The goals established for the Alaska WPP are as follows:

1. **Establish Baseline Environmental Data for Alaska's Wetlands:** Determine where Alaska's wetlands are located (currently only about 36% of Alaska has National Wetland Inventory map coverage), establish their type and function, assess their condition, and develop a statewide prioritization or identification/classification process for the most significant wetlands.
2. **Develop Criteria For Assessing Wetland Condition And Ranking In Alaska:** Identify and characterize the state's ecoregions, establish a standardized protocol to assess wetland condition, and develop a systematic approach for categorizing the significance of wetlands throughout the state.
3. **Develop an Alaska Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Methodology:** Develop a monitoring and assessment framework where wetland data is collected, stored, and shared in a way that benefits all those working to manage wetland resources.
4. **Support the Existing Permitting Process:** Develop and implement an efficient regulatory program that effectively manages and protects wetlands while supporting responsible development.
5. **Develop a Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy:** Identify and evaluate existing compensatory mitigation options in Alaska and develop a comprehensive statewide mitigation strategy that will ensure analysis of wetlands occurs at the appropriate scale.
6. **Provide Education and Outreach:** Educate and raise awareness of the value and benefits of healthy wetlands, improve collaboration and cooperation between regulatory and resource agencies, non-profit organizations, and the public to ensure consideration of wetlands occurs during planning and project development.
7. **Identify Long-Term Support:** Identify potential partnerships, resources, and sources of financial support to ensure sustainable management of the Alaska WPP.

Core Elements

This section describes the two core elements that Alaska is pursuing (monitoring and assessment and regulation) and identifies the needs, goals, objectives, and action items the state is proposing. The state needs to develop a comprehensive monitoring and assessment strategy and corresponding regulations that would allow key stakeholders within the state to manage wetland resources according to the objectives outlined within the strategy.

Wetland Monitoring and Assessment

Wetland Monitoring – like other water quality monitoring – is the process of evaluating the condition or quality of wetlands, including physical, chemical, and biological characteristics. Monitoring is the systematic observation and recording of current and changing wetland conditions. Wetland monitoring can support comparisons of different wetlands, support evaluation of the outcome of wetland management programs, or define changes in wetland condition over time.

Wetland Assessment is simply using the monitoring data to evaluate or appraise wetlands to support decision-making and planning processes. Wetland assessment can include the use of scientific evaluation methods other than direct monitoring such as: mapping; use of mapping and other remote sensing methods to determine wetland function or condition; modeling of past or future condition; and so on. Given the scope of wetland resources in many states, broader assessment tools are more practical on a large scale than site specific monitoring efforts for many purposes, although both approaches have a role.

Wetlands are typically characterized by their condition (e.g. pristine, impaired) and functions (e.g. habitat, groundwater recharge), or both. Wetland condition is the current state of the resource as compared to reference standards for physical, chemical, and biological characteristics. Assessing wetland conditions can be a challenge in Alaska as we do not have a significant library of “reference wetlands” or a standard by which to grade current conditions. Wetland functions represent the processes that characterize wetland ecosystems and generally requires some method of assessing function.

NEEDS

Identify gaps in monitoring data

Improve data collection and coordination between agencies

Establish baseline wetland conditions and identify areas of permafrost

Determine consistent eco-region classification and compile specific data for each region

Define a statewide or regional wetland delineation methodology with a rapid field method

Develop a comprehensive monitoring and assessment strategy for Alaska with core indicators to represent wetland conditions

Identify high-risk wetlands and prioritize areas of statewide significance

Develop a statewide strategy to easily identify planned developments

Define a statewide approach for watershed planning

Establish a comprehensive statewide geospatial database to catalog wetland areas and track losses

Identify consistent sources of financial support and resources

Improve public, industry, and agency awareness about the value of wetlands

Goal 1 – Establish Baseline Environmental Data for Alaska’s Wetlands⁵ (Core Element: Monitoring and Assessment)

A complete wetland inventory would allow managers to track changes in wetland resources throughout the state. Alaska’s vast size and many remote areas is a major challenge that has prevented large scale collection of reliable wetland data. Wetland managers would greatly benefit from a central comprehensive statewide wetland database that incorporates reliable data from numerous entities.

Objective 1: Alaska Wetland Workgroup

DEC and DNR will establish and co-chair an Alaska Wetland Workgroup. The purpose of the workgroup is to oversee the WPP, provide guidance on overarching wetland issues, identify information gaps and needs, and establish Alaska-specific monitoring and assessment protocols. The workgroup would be comprised of federal, state, and local agencies and other key stakeholders as needed. The workgroup would partner with the Statewide Interagency Review Team and other comparable workgroups depending on the current needs. The workgroup would meet at least three times a year or more as needed. On a yearly basis, the workgroup would review progress and reassess priorities for future activities.

Activities

- Identify potential workgroup participants from a variety of background and disciplines.
- Establish roles and expectations for workgroup members and develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- Consult with state and federal resource agencies, industry groups, tribes, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders to identify resources, information needs, and gaps.
- Research and network with national or regional wetland monitoring programs and workgroups; communicate with stakeholders; and create a network of federal, state, and local agencies and tribal organizations.

Objective 2: Alaska Wetland Inventory

DNR and DEC will oversee the creation of an Alaska Wetland Inventory that would consist of a central archive of wetland data and a comprehensive statewide map of wetlands. Wetland managers, community planners, and the public could use this information for a variety of functions, such as tracking wetland losses, identifying high priority areas for protection, and prioritizing areas under the highest risk of development or impairment. Initial steps would include establishing protocols, characterizing the state’s ecoregions, and generating a realistic schedule for completing the inventory.

⁵ The State of Alaska is focusing its efforts during 2016-2018 on Goal 1. The remaining Goals and Objectives will be accomplished as funding becomes available.

Activities

- Communicate with federal, state, and local agencies and tribal organizations to identify shared goals and objectives and create a network to share information.
- Identify accessible sources of wetland data (e.g., state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, universities, consulting firms).
- Identify upcoming or near-term monitoring projects.
- Collect wetland data into a central clearinghouse for inclusive public access with a consistent method for collecting new data. Develop mapping protocols for data collection in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that data is collected consistently and can be imported directly into the National Wetland Inventory.
- Establish quality assurance and control procedures.
- Prioritize regions of the state for wetland mapping.
- Develop a publically accessible Alaska wetland geographic information system (GIS).

Goal 2 – Develop Criteria for Assessing Wetland Condition and Ranking in Alaska (Core Element: Monitoring and Assessment)

Alaska has yet to establish a unified approach to wetland condition assessment and ranking due to the extensive diversity of ecoregions and unique wetland types found across the state. The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would provide wetland managers a single or regional approach to condition assessment using scientifically sound criteria that will allow faster and more reliable determination of wetland conditions within each ecoregion. The workgroup would establish a standardized protocol to assess wetland condition and develop a systematic approach to categorizing the significance of wetlands in Alaska.

Objective 1: Ecoregion Characterization

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would identify and characterize the state's ecoregions and establish a baseline for core indicators to represent wetland condition and function.

Activities

- Review scientific literature to better understand the unique features of Alaska's diverse ecological and hydrological systems.
- Establish baseline data on each of the state's ecoregions including environmental conditions, critical habitats, areas of permafrost, historical and future land use, and planned developments.
- Develop a single or regional wetland delineation methodology with a rapid field assessment.
- Delineate the state's ecoregions based on watershed areas or other geographic boundaries.

- Select and verify core indicators used to assess wetland condition and function in each ecoregion and/or wetland type, and confirm indicators are scientifically defensible.

Objective 2: Functional Assessments

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would develop a single or regional functional assessment methodology including rapid field assessments for the various ecoregions within the state.

Activities

- Review existing functional assessment methodologies used within the state and other states with similar climates.
- Establish a set of rapid functional assessments that can be used in the various ecoregions.
- Establish process and protocol for determining wetland condition based on functional assessments.
- Develop mapping protocols for wetland condition so that this can be incorporated into the Alaska Wetland Inventory .
- Develop a wetland condition ranking for wetlands within each ecoregion.
- Prioritize regional schedule of functional assessments for wetlands.

Objective 3: Categorize Wetlands

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would develop a categorization of wetlands within the state to determine those with the highest functions and values and those of statewide significance.

Activities

- Consult with other stakeholder groups to identify the most critical wetland functions and values for Alaska.
- Identify areas with significant or unique wetland resources.
- Develop a strategy for identifying wetland reference conditions.
- Establish a statewide wetland ranking methodology based on current condition (e.g., Category I Wetlands).
- Rank previously identified areas for further research, improvements, preservation.

Goal 3 – Develop Alaska Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy (Core Element: Monitoring and Assessment)

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup, in consultation with other key stakeholders, would develop a wetland monitoring and assessment strategy for Alaska consistent with *Elements of a State Water Monitoring and Assessment Program for Wetlands (EPA 2006)*. The Alaska Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy would evaluate existing methodologies and adopt or adapt these for Alaska where possible, and establish a framework where wetland information and data is collected, stored, and shared in a way that benefits all involved in the management of wetland resources in Alaska.

Objective 1: Evaluate Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategies

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would review potential wetland monitoring and assessment methods and strategies currently used in Alaska or other states that may be applied in Alaska.

Activities

- Review existing monitoring and assessment methods and strategies that may be used as a template for Alaska.
- Identify gaps in the various methods and strategies and collaborate on solutions.
- Develop a template for a monitoring and assessment strategy.
- Identify a pilot project to test the efficacy of strategy, if possible.

Objective 2: Develop a Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would develop a single or regional Alaska Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy for use throughout the state. The strategy would integrate existing strategies whenever possible.

Activities

- Identify long-term environmental outcomes that would benefit from a wetlands monitoring and assessment program.
- Identify wetland monitoring objectives, data needs, and uses.
- Define a monitoring design.
- Select a set of core indicators to represent wetland conditions or a suite of functions.
- Establish criteria to evaluate adequacy of monitoring and assessment strategy.
- Develop quality assurance and control procedures to ensure consistency in assessments.
- Review and compare results of the pilot project used to test the strategy when completed.

Objective 3: Prioritize Wetlands for Monitoring and Assessment

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would prioritize areas of the state where the Alaska Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy protocol will be implemented.

Activities

- Review available wetland monitoring data and identify gaps.
- Collect monitoring and assessment data and incorporate into the Alaska Wetland geospatial database.
- Consult with state water quality programs to continually reevaluate areas of statewide significance.
- Consult with state land use planning programs to identify planned developments.
- Prioritize areas for near and long-term monitoring.

Regulation

Some states view the regulation of wetland alteration (dredge and fill) as the foundation of a state wetland program, and build other components - e.g. mapping, wetland assessment methods, and mitigation – to address regulatory needs. In other states, regulation has been viewed as the culmination of program development, making use of state expertise to ensure protection of identified essential resources. There are examples of successful regulatory programs that have evolved from either direction.

Currently in Alaska, DEC’s primary role in regulating activities in wetlands is through implementation of the Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 401 certification program. Section 401 provides states the legal authority to review a permit application or project that requires a federal license or permit (e.g., a 404 permit) that might result in a discharge into a water of the U.S. The applicant must obtain a Certificate of Reasonable Assurance from DEC before conducting a regulated activity. In evaluating a project, DEC

NEEDS
Improve the state’s involvement in the current Section 404 process
A tracking system that monitors implementation of permit and certification conditions
How do wetlands fit within the state’s anti-degradation policy?
Ecoregion/Watershed approach to wetland mitigation guidance
Consistent implementation of compensatory mitigation
2008 Mitigation Final Rule implementation in the State of Alaska, national policy is not the best fit for Alaska.
Permit efficiency; reduce the amount of time spent on paperwork and administration of program
State wetland expertise and 404 permitting knowledge
Evaluate the assumption of the 404 Program in Alaska
Development of additional general permits
Guidance and policy regarding forms and applications – what are agency requirements
Pre-application meetings
Determine and define “Waters of the State” – how to handle isolated waters and wetlands that are not jurisdictional under the federal program.

reviews the proposed project description and estimated impacts, coordinates with other state and federal agencies and local governments as necessary, and reviews public and agency comments. DEC has authority to approve, approve with special conditions, waive, or deny a project based on compliance with the CWA, state water quality standards, or other applicable state law.

DNR is also working toward developing a comprehensive program for implementing the 2008 Final Mitigation Rule for Compensatory Mitigation. Current implementation of the rule is based on guidance generated at the national level, which may not be the most effective approach for Alaska given the unique wetland types and challenges the state faces. In 2013, representatives from several state and federal agencies established a Statewide Interagency Review Team (SIRT) to address compensatory mitigation issues of broad or statewide applicability. The intent is to provide consistency among the various agencies involved in Interagency Review Teams⁶ and an opportunity to discuss sensitive issues, such as flexibility in how the rule is implemented.

The state has investigated the possibility of assuming Section 404 permitting authority on several occasions since the early 1980's. The rationale is that DEC's Division of Water is responsible for monitoring and regulating water quality throughout the state at every stage of the hydrologic cycle. Since Alaska's land mass is so expansive, the state concluded they should explore whether to exert the state's right and responsibility to ensure the true interests of Alaskans were represented in decisions made regarding wetlands. The most recent effort in 2013-2014 made considerable progress in evaluating the feasibility of assuming the program. Some notable accomplishments include creation of a geospatial database, preliminary development of general permits for placer mining and minor transportation projects, and preliminary development of state wetland regulations. Funding to continue to evaluate assuming authority of the Section 404 program ended in 2014, but the state continues to build partnerships and pursue available options for improving upon the current 404 program in the state.

Goal 4 – Support the Existing Permitting Process (Core Element: Regulation)

The state would explore ways to support the existing regulatory program to effectively manage/protect wetlands while supporting responsible development. A successful permitting program requires an interagency framework that adequately protects the aquatic environment while delivering timely permit decisions that are predictable, reasonable, and flexible for the applicant.

Objective 1: Examine 401 Certification Program

DEC would examine the 401 Certification program and explore options to improve upon the current process.

⁶ Under EPA's 2008 Compensatory Mitigation for Losses of Aquatic Resources Final Rule, wetland mitigation bank proposals are reviewed, evaluated, and negotiated by a team of agencies called Interagency Review Team (IRT). The role of the IRT is to work with applicants to develop a mitigation banking instrument.

Activities

- Review current DEC procedures used in the 401 Certification process, review other states' 401 certification process, and revise DEC's process as needed.
- Evaluate the minimum criteria used to make 401 determinations to strengthen scientific and legal sufficiency.
- Review and track permitting actions to identify areas at high risk for impairment.
- Analyze the feasibility of developing a mechanism to identify past projects' compliance with state water quality standards.
- Develop a strategy to use permitting data for community planning.

Objective 2: Expedite the Permitting Process

DEC would explore ways to support and expedite the permitting process in the state. According to historical permitting data, USACE Section 404 Individual Permits require, on average, 208 days to process from receipt of application to issuance of a permit.

Activities

- Review the USACE permitting process, past permitting actions, and mitigation activities.
- Review current General Permits that the USACE has implemented nationwide.
- Explore the use of Statewide Programmatic General Permits (SPGPs) that would allow the state to issue these permits and process the applications and reduce workload for the USACE.
- Assist in developing a consistent format for all General Permits to reduce confusion and expedite renewals and revisions.
- Use existing and new data to build or incorporate into GIS database to track permit activity and mitigation sites.
- Use agreements under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) and Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) and establish interagency teams to create efficiencies in the current 401 certification and 404 permitting programs.
- Develop clear guidelines for roles, responsibilities, and procedures for review of permits for activities that require approval from more than one state agency.
- Review Alaska-specific (or regional) field and office-based wetland delineation methodologies and develop guidance.

Goal 5 – Develop a Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy (Core Element: Regulation)

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup, in cooperation with the SIRT, will develop a collaborative approach to implementing a comprehensive statewide mitigation strategy for Alaska that will ensure consideration of wetlands occurs at the appropriate scale and build consensus and consistency among agencies.

Objective 1: Evaluate a Statewide Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy⁷

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would work with the SIRT to evaluate existing approaches to mitigation and establish a consistent statewide approach to implementing compensatory mitigation in Alaska.

Activities

- Review existing approaches to implement compensatory mitigation (DNR completed in 2014).
- Identify gaps and data needs.
- Identify potential opportunities to increase compensatory mitigation options in Alaska.
- Evaluate methods to increase the number of mitigation banks and in-lieu fee operators in Alaska.
- Establish performance standards and success criteria for mitigation.
- Develop Service Area Guidance to create consistency in mitigation strategies.
- Establish consistent statewide Interagency Review Team (IRT) and a standard method for review of mitigation instruments.
- Establish a mechanism for tracking the consistency and efficiency of IRT's.

Objective 2: Watershed Approach

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup will work with the SIRT to establish a consistent statewide approach to implement the “watershed approach⁸” to compensatory mitigation in Alaska.

Activities

- Review other state and local watershed plans.

⁷ The State of Alaska is focusing its efforts in 2016-2018 on Goal 5, Objective 1.

⁸ EPA's 2008 Compensatory Mitigation for Losses of Aquatic Resources Final Rule emphasizes implementing a watershed approach in selecting compensatory mitigation project locations to the degree practicable. The rule defines watershed approach as “an analytical process for making compensatory mitigation decisions that support the sustainability or improvement of aquatic resources in a watershed”.

- Develop an MOU that clearly outlines a statewide agreement regarding ecoregion/watershed approach and clear guidance and boundaries.
- Develop a protocol/criteria for situations when adhering to a watershed approach is not feasible.
- Develop planning guidance and a template/pilot project to establish a watershed plan format for Alaska watersheds to create consistency
- Explore new methods and tools for efficient, consistent, and easy implementation of compensatory mitigation projects.
- Coordinate among agencies, programs, and industry groups to support program goals and to streamline efforts.

Objective 3: Finalize Statewide Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy

The Alaska Wetland Workgroup would work with the SIRT to finalize a comprehensive statewide compensatory mitigation strategy for Alaska.

Activities

- Collaborate with other states to determine potential methods to improve upon existing compensatory mitigation methods in Alaska.
- Coordinate among state and federal resource agencies, industry groups, tribes, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders to identify compensatory mitigation constraints and solutions.
- Develop a compensatory mitigation strategy for Alaska.

Goal 6 – Provide Education and Outreach (Core Elements: Monitoring and Assessment and Regulation)

DEC, DNR, and Alaska Wetland Workgroup will provide educational opportunities to raise awareness of the value and benefits of healthy wetlands.

Objective 1: Easy Access to Wetland Resources

Provide clear and easy access to wetland resources, wetland management, updates on the development of Alaska's Wetland Program Plan, and contacts.

Activities

- Develop and maintain wetland websites through DEC and DNR.
- Provide links to Association of State Wetland Managers (ASWM) and other wetland resource websites.

- Provide a list serve opportunity for interested parties.
- Develop presentations for use at conferences such as the Alaska Forum on the Environment and Alaska Wastewater Management Association.
- Develop a communication plan with talking points, key messages, and a timeline for presentation opportunities.
- Publish a pocket guide to common wetland plants of Alaska.

Goal 7 – Identify Long -Term Support (Core Elements: Monitoring and Assessment and Regulation)

DEC and Alaska Wetland Workgroup would work collaboratively with state and federal partners and other key stakeholders to identify potential partnerships, support, and resources that can be used to sustain long term management of Alaska’s WPP.

Objective 1: Identify Sources of Support

Identify potential long-term support for the Alaska WPP.

Activities

- Develop collaborative public/private partnerships to identify potential sources of support.
- Apply for future WPDG through the EPA.
- Look to the ASWM and other national organizations for suggestions and recommendations on funding sources.
- Collaborate with state and federal agencies to pool funds to accomplish activities.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADF&G	Alaska Department of Fish and Game
ADNR	Alaska Department of Natural Resources
ADOT&PF	Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
ASWM	Association of State Wetland Managers
CEF	Core Elements Framework
CWA	Clean Water Act
DEC	Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
EPA	United States Environmental Protection Agency
GIS	Geographic Information System
IPA	Intergovernmental Personnel Act
IRT	Interagency Review Team
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
QA/QC	Quality Assurance / Quality Control
SIRT	Statewide Interagency Review Team
SPGP	Statewide Programmatic General Permits
USACE	United States Army Corps of Engineers
WPDG	Wetland Program Development Grant
WPP	Wetland Program Plan
WRDA	Water Resources Development Act

Schedule

Monitoring and Assessment

Goal 1 – Establish Baseline Environmental Data for Wetlands

Objective 1: Alaska Wetland Workgroup

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
DEC and DNR	–	Identify workgroup participants	○			
DEC and DNR	–	Establish roles and MOU	○			
DEC and DNR	–	Identify resources, needs, gaps	○			

Objective 2: Alaska Wetland Inventory

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
DEC and DNR	–	Identify goals and objectives	○			
DNR	Initiated in 2014	Identify accessible resources of data	○			
DNR	–	Identify upcoming development projects	○			
DNR	Initiated in 2015	Collect data in clearinghouse	○			
DEC and DNR	–	QA\QC procedures	○			
DEC and DNR	–	Prioritize regions for wetland mapping	○			
DEC and DNR	–	Develop wetland GIS	○			

Alaska Wetland Program Plan

Goal 2 – Develop Criteria for Monitoring and Assessing Wetland Condition and Ranking in Alaska

Objective 1: Ecoregion Characterization

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To be Determined	–	Literature review of AK's ecology			○	
To be Determined	–	Establish baseline data on each ecoregion			○	
To be Determined	–	Develop wetland delineation method			○	
To be Determined	–	Delineate ecoregions			○	
To be Determined	–	Select core indicators to assess wetland condition in each ecoregion			○	

Objective 2: Functional Assessments

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To be Determined	–	Review existing methodologies			○	
To be Determined	–	Establish rapid functional assessment for each ecoregion			○	
To be Determined	–	Establish process to determine wetland condition based on functional assessment			○	
To be Determined	–	Develop mapping protocols			○	
To be Determined	–	Develop wetland condition ranking for each ecoregion			○	
To be Determined	–	Prioritize regions for functional assessments			○	

Objective 3: Categorize Wetlands

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To be Determined	–	Identify critical functions and values for AK				○
To be Determined	–	Identify areas with significant or unique wetlands				○
To be Determined	–	Develop strategy for identifying reference conditions				○
To be Determined	–	Establish statewide ranking method based on condition assessment				○
To be Determined	–	Rank areas for further attention				○

Alaska Wetland Program Plan

Goal 3 – Develop Alaska Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy

Objective 1: Evaluate Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To Be Determined	–	Review existing strategies			○	
To Be Determined	–	Identify gaps			○	
To Be Determined	–	Develop template for strategy			○	
To Be Determined	–	Identify pilot project			○	

Objective 2: Develop Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Strategy

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To Be Determined	–	Identify long-term environmental outcomes for strategy				○
To Be Determined	–	Identify wetland monitoring objectives, data needs, and uses				○
To Be Determined	–	Define monitoring design				○
To Be Determined	–	Select core indicators				○
To Be Determined	–	Establish criteria to evaluate adequacy of strategy				○
To Be Determined	–	Develop QA/QC procedures				○
To Be Determined	–	Review results of pilot project				○
To Be Determined	–	Finalize strategy				○

Objective 3: Prioritize Wetlands for Monitoring and Assessment

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To Be Determined	–	Review data and identify gaps				○
To Be Determined	–	Collect data and insert into database				○
To Be Determined	–	Evaluate areas of significance				○
To Be Determined	–	Identify planned developments				○
To Be Determined	–	Prioritize areas for near and long-term monitoring				○

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Regulation

Goal 4 – Support the Existing Permitting Process

Objective 1: Examine 401 Certification Program

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
DEC	–	Review DEC and other states procedures		○		
DEC	–	Evaluate minimum criteria used to make determinations		○		
DEC	–	Review and track actions to identify areas at high risk for impairment		○		
DEC	–	Analyze feasibility of developing mechanism to identify compliance issues		○		
DEC	–	Develop strategy to use permitting data for community planning		○		

Objective 2: Expedite the Permitting Process

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To Be Determined	–	Review USACE permitting process, past actions, and mitigation activities				○
To Be Determined	–	Review General Permits used nationwide				○
To Be Determined	–	Explore use of SPGP's				○
To Be Determined	–	Assist in developing template for General Permits				○
To Be Determined	–	Incorporate data into database to track permitting and mitigation actions				○
To Be Determined	–	Use agreements under the IPA and WRDA and establish interagency teams				○
To Be Determined	–	Develop interagency consultation process				○
To Be Determined	–	Review wetland delineation methodologies				○

Alaska Wetland Program Plan

Goal 5 – Develop a Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy

Objective 1: Evaluate Statewide Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
DNR	2014	Review existing strategies	○			
DNR	2014	Identify data needs and gaps	○			
DNR	2014	Identify potential mitigation solutions	○	○		
DNR	–	Facilitate development of mitigation banks and in-lieu fee operators in AK	○	○		
DNR	–	Establish performance standards for mitigation			○	
DNR	–	Develop Service Area Guidance			○	
DNR	–	Establish standard method for IRT review			○	
DNR	–	Establish mechanism for tracking IRT consistency and efficiency			○	

Objective 2: Watershed Approach

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To Be Determined	–	Review local and other states' watershed plans			○	
To Be Determined	–	Develop statewide MOU re: ecoregions and watershed approach			○	
To Be Determined	–	Develop criteria for when watershed approach is infeasible			○	
To Be Determined	–	Develop watershed planning guidance			○	
To Be Determined	–	Explore ways to improve implementation for mitigation			○	
To Be Determined	–	Coordinate among agencies			○	

Objective 3: Finalize Statewide Comprehensive Mitigation Strategy

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
To Be Determined	–	Collaborate on ways to improve existing mitigation methods				○
To Be Determined	–	Coordinate to identify mitigation constraints and solutions				○
To Be Determined	–	Work with SIRT to finalize strategy for AK				○

Monitoring and Assessment and Regulation

Goal 6 – Provide Education and Outreach

Objective 1: Easy Access to Wetland Resources

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
DEC	Existing DEC wetlands website	Develop and maintain wetland website	○			
DEC	–	Provide links to ASWM and other resources	○			
DEC	–	Provide listserv		○		
To be Determined	–	Develop template presentation			○	
To be Determined	–	Develop communication plan			○	
To be Determined	–	Publish a pocket guide to common wetland plants			○	

Goal 7 – Identify Long-Term Support

Objective: Long-Term Support

Responsible Agencies	Completed	Planned Activities	Years from 2016			
			0-3	3-6	6-9	9+
DEC and DNR	–	Develop partnerships to identify potential sources of support	○	○	○	○
DEC and DNR	–	Apply for WPDG	○	○	○	○
DEC and DNR	–	Consult with ASWM and other national organizations for potential opportunities	○	○	○	○
DEC and DNR	–	Identify opportunities to pool funds	○	○	○	○